

Teaching Authority, Faith and Freedom

1. Truth in Christ is entrusted to the Church, and teaching authority is among the gifts of the Spirit. The Venice Statement speaks of instruments and organs by which the Church is maintained in the truth, and constructs a pattern of teaching authority. But paragraph 24 stops short before agreement in placing the prime locus of this authority in a universal primate endowed by virtue of his office with a gift of 'infallible' magisterium. What is the difficulty other than emotional prejudice?

2. Serious and sympathetic inquiry among Anglican theologians about the meaning of papal infallibility is recent. Many Anglicans continue mistakenly to think of it as supposedly attaching to the majority of primatial utterances, not just as rare, isolated acts at times of crisis. But when correctly understood, a number of fears coalesce round the idea:

(i) the concentration in one man of the Holy Spirit's teaching and guiding when that one man cannot help being limited by his background, experience and national culture;

(ii) the term is widely understood to be attributing to the Pope a divinely transcendent freedom from finitude and natural human frailty which asserts too much, and to carry the danger that the sinfulness penetrating all human institutions may pass unrecognised.

(iii) Can a papal statement, issued under juridically correct circumstances but unsupported by Scripture and Tradition, impose on all believers matters to be henceforth deemed essential to faith?

(iv) The popular (perhaps minimising) apologetic which refers to the Marian definitions as the only two generally agreed instances of the rare operation of papal infallibility leaves an awkward question: if the Holy Father is endowed by

office with such powers, ought he not to have something more important to say?

(v) The word 'irreformable' seems intended to exclude the intellectual adaptation of the gospel to the framework and assumptions of contemporary culture, which indeed may often be right but not if thereby the gospel of Christ is identified with obsolete categories of thought and social forms.

3. Distinct from the concept of papal infallibility, there is the style of control exercised by the centralised authority in Rome. There is no necessary logical link between the censure of Hans Küng (or any other rebellious divine) and the ARCIC quest for convergence in doctrine; but both Roman Catholics and Anglicans have seen a psychological connection, adverse to ecumenism not only between Rome and Canterbury but between Rome and Orthodoxy.

4. There can be little question that a large number of Anglicans would not think it right to lose the openness of the Christian society of Anglican tradition, and do not envy the more closed 'authoritarian' style of the Roman Catholic Church (as they see it). They do not think it possible, without incurring grave disadvantages, to exercise so rigid a degree of social control. They do not in general distinguish themselves from the vocal opposition of Roman Catholics to secularist sexual mores - the Lambeth Conference of 1958 made a statement on abortion which has stood well. But probably the Anglican opposition appears less 'absolute', and would think it more possible to allow certain rare circumstances in which abortion could be the lesser evil. The Anglican view of authority is also more patient of bizarre or negative theological opinion; more confident that truth will prevail, and that the orthodox doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity will continue to be nobly affirmed in Liturgy (and Hymn Book) long after donnish questions have been

forgotten. Nevertheless, the position looks unattractively weak in Roman Catholic eyes, and it remains to be seen whether, if the forces of atheism and militant secularity grow stronger still, the Anglican sense of a balanced tradition of right doctrine may be more seriously threatened, and its comprehensiveness stretched to threaten integrity.

In any event, in the Roman Catholic church there are eloquent voices speaking for the more open society, just as there are Anglican voices asking for a stronger lead from authority. Is there need for the division of view to coincide with frontiers of communion?

5. If Roman Catholics are asked what for them is missing in Anglicanism, one prominent element in the usual answer is the absence of living and central authority able to speak to and for the whole Church; or even the whole Anglican communion of local churches in eucharistic communion with each other through their communion with the see of Canterbury. Anglicans are bound together by, and find the title-deeds of the Church's apostolic mission in, the sacred tradition of holy Scripture and in the faithful transmission (by both clergy and laity) of the central truths of the faith. They understand authority as diffused in the body of all believers under the word of God to which scripture and tradition bear witness. But the Anglican reserve (e.g. the declaration of the Lambeth Conference 1968 that the claims of papal authority as traditionally interpreted could not be accepted) before the sheer cliff of papal infallibility looks to Roman Catholics like a dangerous weakening of commitment to receiving the gospel entrusted to the Church as revelation. Truth in the Church is threatened by Marxist (liberation) theology, reduced and unitarian Christology, and secularising erosions of other kinds. Roman Catholics value papal authority as the principal bulwark of defence. Therefore Anglican notions of diffused

authority in an open society look to Rome likely to issue in half-hearted or conformist convictions on matters of dogma and morals; in a failure to recognize the secularising impulse within "women's liberation" (profoundly dependent on contraception?) and its obvious influence on the demand for the ordination for women; in encouragement to individualist desires to take such doctrines as one happens to like and to ignore the rest. There is already enough of such individualism within the Roman Catholic Church to make authority understandably cool about the prospect of restoring communion with some sixty million Anglicans whose trumpet does not indeed always speak with a less than certain sound, but which (because of the lack of central authority) is expected to fluff its notes.

H.C.

January 1980